

# Sri Lankan driver held hostage in Iraq

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The fate of Dinesh Dharmendram Rajaratnam, a Sri Lankan truck driver, who was captured in Iraq by Islamic extremists along with fellow driver Abul Kashem from Bangladesh late last month, is still unknown. They are being held by the notorious Ansar al-Sunna, the group responsible for the cold-blooded slaughter of 12 Nepalese workers in August.

The Al Jazeera television network broadcast a videotape on October 28 of the two captives together with documents verifying their names and nationality. But as in the case of the Nepalese workers, al-Sunna has issued no demands and has ignored the impassioned appeals by the families of the two men for their release. Neither Sri Lanka nor Bangladesh have given any military support to the US occupation of Iraq.

Like many contract workers in Iraq, Rajaratnam and Kashem were driven by poverty to engage in the highly dangerous work. Both were working for the Kuwait-based Jassem Transport and Stevedore Company, transporting supplies to US forces in Iraq. They were driving trucks to the Baghdad airport complex when their convoy, which included several US army jeeps, was ambushed.

Tuvan Pavas, one of their co-workers, recently returned to Sri Lanka. He told the WSWs that he had been scheduled to make the same journey but there was a delay in loading his truck. He came across the trucks of the two men on the roadside near Baghdad. When he informed the company, he was simply told to unload the cargo and return to base.

Pavas explained that Jassem Transport employed workers from India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Mauritius. “Workers are compelled to go to Iraq to earn more money. If you go to Iraq they would pay us 30 dinars a day. It is a risky job. But we want to earn money to run our families. I don’t have a proper house,” he said.

The WSWs also spoke to Rajaratnam’s family. He is 37-years-old, married and with three sons. He went to Kuwait in June last year as a means of supporting his family. For 10 years he only had temporary work as a truck driver which gave him a limited income.

The family lives in a small house, made of wooden planks at Wattala, a suburb of Colombo. It has only one room: the bed, and the front is used as a veranda and a small kitchen. Like other houses in the area, it does not have basic facilities such as running water. The whole area is surrounded by a marsh.

Rajaratnam’s wife Doreen Rita explained the family’s situation: “We are living under enormous difficulties. He had no permanent job and could not earn enough income for our family needs and for the education of our children. I am unemployed. In order to obtain the job in Kuwait he had to pay 68,000 rupees (about \$US680 or a year’s wage for an average Sri Lankan worker) to the local recruiting agency. He had to borrow that money at 10 percent interest per month.”

According to the service agreement, the company could employ Rajaratnam only in Kuwait. But the Sri Lankan government, which insists on such agreements, turns a blind eye to the fact that once in Kuwait, workers are pressured or bribed into working in Iraq. In this case, the company refused to pay Rajaratnam his promised salary unless he undertook the risky work of driving inside Iraq.

Doreen Rita issued an appeal to her husband’s captors: “He is innocent and anyone can understand what he did was his job that was forced on him by his employer. This is a terrible blow to our family. I cannot even think how can I manage the family without him. I appeal to those who have detained him—‘Please release him for sake of our children’”.

Rajaratnam’s mother told the WSWs: “When we heard the news we were terribly shocked. My son is innocent and he has not any connection with the

ongoing war in Iraq. We have had bitter experiences like the Iraqi people are undergoing. We are also the victims of war in Sri Lanka. In 1983, when the racial attacks were directed at Tamils, our home near Wattala town was completely looted. We had to flee to save our lives.”

The Kuwaiti company that employed Rajaratnam promised to give “every assistance to get [them] released”. But little has been done. As far as such contractors are concerned, if profits continue to flow in, workers from impoverished countries such as Sri Lanka and Bangladesh are expendable.

A report on *Middle East Online* in September explained: “Private Kuwaiti firms were quick to cash in on their country’s support for the war and are believed to have struck contracts worth at least three billion dollars with US forces and Iraqi companies.... Hundreds of trucks and tankers have been transporting fuel, emergency food supplies, military and civilian machinery into Iraq almost daily for the last 18 months. Nearly all the drivers are from developing countries.”

Such convoys of trucks and tankers are provided with US military or private security until the cargo is delivered inside Iraq. “[T]hereafter, they are on their own, making them easy prey for kidnappers,” *Middle East Online* stated.

The Sri Lankan and Bangladeshi governments have failed to make any serious efforts to secure the release of the two hostages. Sri Lanka’s deputy foreign minister Wiswa Warnapala told the media that the government was trying to enlist the help of the Indian government and pointed out that Sri Lanka did not send troops to Iraq. The Bangladeshi foreign minister Morshed Khan made a similar appeal, saying that his country has not been “involved in conflict anywhere in the world.”

However, neither government is prepared to push the issue as it could threaten the lucrative flow of foreign exchange from migrant workers in the Middle East. More than a million Sri Lankans are working abroad, usually in Middle East countries under terrible working conditions. Like Rajaratnam, most migrant workers come from the poorest urban and rural families.

That a worker like Rajaratnam has been held for more than a month reveals the class contempt of Islamic extremist organisations such as Ansar al-Sunna. Like Al Qaeda, such groups represent the interests of

dissident layers of the bourgeoisie not the working class or the oppressed masses. Far from assisting in the struggle against the US occupation of Iraq, the abduction and, in some cases, senseless killing of innocent workers will only be used by the Bush administration to justify its criminal actions.



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